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ABSTRACT

The political myth of a nation substantially influences the way people behave, the goals to which they aspire, and the rationale upon which common actions are taken and through which rhetorical identification can be achieved. Myth is the image at the center of a culture that is the ideal of the culture's excellence. Myths are not accurate descriptions of reality, nor are they totally separate from nor contrary to reality. Rather, they give order, definition, and evaluation to an otherwise chaotic reality. They provide a common ground of thought and perception that establishes ideal circumstances and boundaries of behavior. The nature of the fundamental political myth of a culture and the scene that it creates poses three alternatives to those who seek to change the dynamics of society: leaders can use the myths as the foundation of rhetorical identification; they can change the myths and the concomitant scene thereby creating new requirements for sociopolitical action; or they can reapply the myths. By appeals that heighten the inconsistency between the perfection of the myths and their application, society is vulnerable to social change. (TJ)

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PERFECT POLITICAL MYTH AS SUBSTANCE FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENT VULNERABILITY

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"Freedom is one of the most obscure and ambiguous terms not only of philosophical but also of political language. As soon as we begin to speculate about the freedom of the will we find ourselves involved in an inextricable labyrinth of metaphysical questions and antinomies. As to political freedom all of us know that it is one of the most used and abused slogans. All political parties have assured us that they are ever the true representatives and guardians of freedom."[1] With this statement Cassirer identifies an interesting issue regarding the substance of political rhetoric in our society. Freedom, equality, and pursuit of happiness are terms of substantial potency especially for those involved in various social movement efforts. People who are distressed by social, political, or economic injustice place under their arms the Preamble of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence each with its commitment to a perfect union among people. These documents reify the perfect political myth even if it is fraught with ambiguity.

The political myth embodied in these documents characterizes a tranquil society based on the assumption that no standards of government can be higher than life, liberty, justice, equality, and the pursuit of happiness. The folkloric presentation of the myth portrays in tones characteristic of Norman Rockwell the honest, patriotic citizen debating crucial issues, casting the deciding vote, and providing a warm and

secure hearth for a loving family. This myth is passed from one generation to the next through myriad tales, civics classes, and the portrayal of the founding fathers who epitomize the myth. Each citizen is the metaphoric counterpart of the founding fathers; "Citizen Jones, like Jefferson, seeks life, liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness."

Consequently these documents have a substantial influence over how people behave and the goals to which they aspire. As Burke suggests, they form a substance,[2] a rationale shared by others upon which common actions are taken and through which rhetorical identification can be achieved.[3] The documents provide a consensus of public opinion regarding which acts are just, the standards of equal treatment, and the pursuit of happiness. The attitudes reflected in these documents constitute the socio-political counterparts of religion; "in order to plead for such attitudes as persuasively as possible, the religious always ground their exhortations (to themselves and others) in statement of the widest and deepest possible scope, concerning the authorship of men's motives."[4]

Likewise, the basic state papers shape the authorship of motives which in turn constitute a powerful rhetorical incentive. They provide a scene against which all political acts are played. In terms of social movement activity, they provide those in power with a rhetorical rationale for maintaining the status quo. Ironically they also provide motivational and rhetorical impetus for social movement actions and agitation. Suggesting the nature of perfect socio-political relationships, they create the problem as they posit the solution by affirming liberty, equality, justice, and pursuit

of happiness as the perfect human motives. Without goals of equality, inequality would not be discomforting.

Our socio-political system is inherently vulnerable to social movement challenge because of these expressed ideals and because the locus of control is proclaimed to reside with the people rather than with a monarchy or theocracy. When a people proclaims a perfect state, the battlelines are drawn between those who believe that the circumstances comply with the standard of perfection and those who do not.[5]

Accordingly the central argument is this: The controlling faction of society is vulnerable when the challenging faction successfully shapes the consensus of public opinion around the perfecting political myth and applies it to promote the interests of the members of the social movement. The controlling faction is vulnerable when it can no longer exclude those individuals from the protection of the perfecting myth. If this theme is valid, then at least three social movement strategies are possible: (1) to use the myth as grounds for rhetorical identification; (2) to attack the central myth and change it to satisfy the expectations of the protest group; and (3) to apply it to social movement group members as it is applied to others and as it is apparently designed to function in perfection.

Myth

Before exploring each of these observations some mention of the nature of myth is appropriate. A useful mode of analysis focuses on the concept of myth as the scene and concomitantly as substance for rhetorical, political, and social

acts.[6] Myths express the ideological, structural, tactical, and rhetorical heritage of a people. They provide a continuity between generations and instruct individuals about the cultural scene and what is appropriate to it. Myths are part of a society's Weltanschauung which is "intimately tied to one's epistemology, psychology, axiology, and metaphysics," which influence "rhetorical choice."[7]

Once myths are present as "the collective desire personified,"[8] the people who live by them reify them. As Weaver observes, myth is "a tyrannizing image" at the center of a culture "which draws everything towards itself. This image is the ideal of its excellence."[9] Myths may be religious and constitute an orderly explanation of life, death, and moral social order. They may be economic and account for the fact that some people have millions of dollars while others live in poverty; within the substance of this particular myth Horatio Alger's stories and Russell Conwell's "Acres of Diamonds" became versions of the "collective desire." The purity of the youman farmer is a myth embodying the ideal of patriotic democracy characteristic of the Jeffersonian revolutionary spirit. In a former time to suggest that what is good for General Motors is good for America was to make rhetorical application of the myth of the industrial state. From the great beast industry comes all goods; in turn individuals must be sacrificed through hard work and unemployment in filial obedience to this often angry god.

Myths are not accurate descriptions of reality; nor are they totally separate from nor contrary to reality. The important feature of myths, whether in narrative form or as

an expression of popular beliefs, values, and attitudes, is that they elaborate on and account for reality. They give order, definition, and evaluation to an otherwise chaotic reality. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest, "The symbolic connection brings about transferences between the symbol and the thing symbolized. When the cross, the flag, the monarch are viewed as symbols of christianity, the fatherland, the state, these realities excite love or hate, veneration or contempt, which would be incomprehensible and ridiculous if these symbols, in addition to having a representative character, did not constitute a bond of participation."[10]

The nature of myths is such that they are central to the cultural knowledge of a people and therefore the most basic elements of rhetorical substance. They constitute fundamental premises, "an unquestioned belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a particular meaning."[11] Myths are scenic; they provide rationale for the acts of and relationships among people. They help "legitimize government policies regardless of their effectiveness."[12] Myths are scenic because they provide "'beginning' in the sense of both temporal priority and logical priority (or 'first principles')."[13] They provide a commonground of thought and perception which establish ideal circumstances and boundaries of behavior.

The critic looking for the crucial scenic elements needs to disclose the "perfecting myth" which "becomes like the originator of the order it perfects."[14] In their regulation of society, which includes controlling the kind and degree of social change, the power elite enjoins others through the

consensus of public opinion to help maintain the scene. With the perfecting myth as the ultimate rhetorical ground for identification they seek support to achieve sufficient stability to exercise social control.[15]

The institutional nature of the scene defines the structural relationships among groups, including those in power and those without it. "Preservation of social order depends upon political elites who can accurately gauge and guide public sentiments through symbolic appeals."[16] Consequently the nature of the scene is essential to the assessment of vulnerability because as Burke observes, the "terrain determines tactics."[17]

Strategies

For these reasons, the nature of the fundamental political myth and the scene which it creates is essential to the rhetorical analysis of social movement strategies. It poses to those who seek to change the dynamics of society three alternatives. (1) Movement leaders can use the myths as the foundation of rhetorical identification. (2) They can change them and the concomitant scene thereby creating new requirements for socio-political action. (3) They can reapply them. By appeals which heighten the inconsistency between the perfection of the myths and their application, society is vulnerable. Those in power must either live with the inconsistency or resolve it. The more persistant and effective the movement challenge is the more difficult the inconsistency is to maintain.

The first of these themes focuses on the availability

of the myth as the substance for identification. Potentially the substance of the movement argument can be identified with central, established myths to bring merger where there is division. The strategy is to attach the movement needs to the prevailing consensus of public opinion. However, making the public aware of the movement needs and attaching these needs to the political myth may be insufficient to exploit the vulnerability of those in control. "Membership in the group often depends on faithful acceptance of various facets of the imaginary picture. Futhermore, the possessors and believers jealously guard the integrity of the myth and will permit no challenge to it."[18] Those in power often know about the grievances, such as lack of equality, suffered by those who are protesting; that very awareness may cause more resistance than willingness to identify with those who are protesting.

The use of the myth as rhetorical substance is usually not enough to exploit the vulnerability of society.[19] In fact, the appeals based on identification usually work more successfully to keep control than to change society.[20] Appeals based on identification are only successful if those in control are willing to correct social inequities and extend the fundamental rights to all people. Indeed the circumstances are usually the opposite. Those in power constitute a vested interest and seek to use the myths as rationale for control and exclusion. They may even hold the agitators responsible for the possibility that society will disintegrate through agitation.

The second strategy aimed at exploiting the vulnerability

is to change the current myth thereby reconstituting the consensus of public opinion. The established myth can be displaced with a new one as was the case when the divine right of kings was displaced with the myth of the divine right of the political mass. This strategy is a struggle over the prevailing public opinion. The attempt on the part of the movement is to form a new consensus of public opinion by creating a political myth even more perfect than the old one.

"When the myths no longer fit the internal plights of those who require them, the transition to newly created myths may take the form of a chaotic voyage into the interior, the certitudes of externalization replaced by the anguish of the internal voyage."[21] This kind of supplanting of myths can occur because of fundamental changes in circumstances whereby old myths fail to satisfy the people; such was the impact of the depression of the 1930's and subsequent New Deal. Some change can be the product of a relatively uneventful evolution of thought in society.[22]

Within the scene disequilibrium arises when certain individuals seek to create a new scene which more satisfactorily reflects their interests and needs. The crucial issue of vulnerability revolves around the extent to which the power elite can control the definition, values, and norms within the scene and to the extent that those in the movement can create scenic changes by creating a new myth which is more satisfactory than the old one.

The necessity of the establishment keeping control of the myth is no better illustrated than by the coming of the War for Independence. Malone notes with special interest

that John Adams wrote Thomas Jefferson that "the real revolution in America was 'in the minds of the people' and was effected between 1760 and 1775, before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington."[23] This observation reinforces the notion that a people create a movement by establishing new myths or by readjusting old ones to provide a new scene for new acts. Leo Marx suggests that "Britain began to lose control of the colonists because the latter began to define themselves in terms of separation, rather than terms of unity."[24] From a time when the colonists swore loyalty to the king, new generations were born and matured without a sense of loyalty to the myth of royalty. The radicals advocating severing allegiance with Britain shifted a substantial number of colonists to believe that it was "necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them." This statement from the Declaration of Independence accomplished two ends. It established a substantive connection with a myth of nature which is more permanent and central than that of the divine right of kings. Moreover, it provided the cataclysmic, seminal event characteristic of the myth of birth and rebirth. A new myth had supplanted the old and supplied rationale for a new nation. A old scene with its appropriate acts had been supplanted by a new scene and new acts. Previously to challenge the king was treason, and now it was a form of loyalty. Such is the impact of changing the scene by changing the perfecting myth.

The third alternative is based upon the contrast between what the perfect political myth claims and what actually exists. The agitators attempt to show that for the full realization of the political myth its provision and protection must be extended to their interests. This extension is not easy because of the nature of myths. "They inhibit search and flexibility, and they keep attention centered upon a particular vision of the world and upon the particular roles for individual actors specified in the myth."[25]

Because of the pliancy of the value structure in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, vested interests on the radical left and right of the political spectrum draw rhetorical substance from these documents and from the myth of the heroic founding fathers. An interesting example of this strategy is found by comparing the rationale for revolution advanced by black activist H. Rap Brown and by the Ku Klux Klan. Brown argued that "the question of violence has been cleared up. This country was born of violence. Violence is as American as cherry pie."[26] In a similar fashion the Klan drew upon Jefferson who said, "'God forbid that we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion.... What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? What country can preserve its liberty if the rulers are not warned from time to time that the people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms; the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of tyrants.' That's what Thomas Jefferson said--he was as much a Klan as anybody in the country--that's what we said, too."[27] Through this statement Jefferson becomes an ally of the Klan. The strategy

behind both of these statements is to take rhetorical substance from the perfect myth and reapply it as rationale for action by the protestors.

Frederick Douglass built his argument upon the contrast between the ideal of the myth and the actuality of slavery. In his criticism of the paradox of slavery in a democratic society he observed that "the signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men. They were great men, too--great enough to give frame to a great age." "They were peace men; but they preferred revolution to peaceful submission to bondage." "With them, justice, liberty and humanity were 'final'; not slavery and oppression." "Washington could not die till he had broken the chains of his slaves." The heroic myth set the standard of justice against which Douglass contrasted the plight of black people: "The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me."[28]

Like other groups, women advocating changes in policy affecting their lives argue that the heroic fathers supplied precedent for action favoring civil liberty and provided principles upon which all people, men and women, should be treated as equals. Reflecting the myth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton reacted to women who did not want to vote. "When I hear American women, descendents of Jefferson, Hancock and Adams, say they do not want to vote, I feel that the blood of the revolutionary heroes must long since have ceased to flow in their veins."[29] The spirit of concerted action was expressed by Susan B. Anthony. To her the "facts also prove that, by all the great fundamental principles of our free

government, not only married women but the entire womanhood of the nation are in a 'condition of servitude' as surely as were our Revolutionary fathers when they rebelled against King George." Extending the inconsistency between the perfect system and the condition of women, she argued that "It was we, the people, not we, the white male citizens, nor we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people, who formed this Union."[30]

In the dream envisioned by Martin Luther King, Jr. the perfecting myth constituted a blank check. "When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."[31] The contrast was between this commitment and the condition of black Americans in 1963.

The strategy to exploit the vulnerability of the controlling faction through reapplication of the perfect political myth is to insist that it is violated by current events. A sharp contrast is struck between the essence of the myth and the treatment of those who are protesting. If the contrast is well drawn and if the imbalance between the myth and its application is disquieting enough, a readjustment in society is likely to occur. If so, the point of vulnerability has been exploited.

Thus, myth is a powerful means for determining how the movement faction is motivated to challenge those in control.

It also suggests at least three means whereby the substance of the myth can be used to exploit the vulnerability of those in control. In a society with a perfect political system expressed in a perfect political myth, those who do not enjoy the fair application of the myth will use it or seek to change it to create a new scene and a new society. Such is the connection between the substance of political myths and social movement vulnerability.

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